DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 455 824 IR 020 780

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TITLE Online Forum Instructional Guide.
PUB DATE 2000-10-00
NOTE 7p.; In: Annual Proceedings of Selected Research and Development Papers Presented at the National Convention of the Association for Educational Communications and Technology (23rd, Denver, CO, October 25-28, 2000). Volumes 1-2; see IR 020 712.
PUB TYPE Reports - Descriptive (141) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Computer Assisted Instruction; Computer Mediated Communication; Curriculum Development; Guidelines; Instructional Design; Instructional Development; Instructional Effectiveness; Instructional Materials; Online Systems; *Teaching Methods

ABSTRACT

This paper presents a guide, based on the experiences of some online teachers and students at Ohio University, offering practical information for instructors who want to teach online more effectively. Online instructional tips are organized and provided in four main areas. The first area of guidelines focuses on pedagogical aspects, and discusses the instructor as facilitator, instructor visibility, feedback, and online materials. The second area focuses on social aspects. Managerial aspects are the focus of the third area, which provides organizational, procedural, and administrative suggestions. Finally, suggestions are provided in the area of technical aspects. (AEF)

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M. Simonson

Online Forum Instructional Guide

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Introduction

This guide provides suggestions to faculty using online forum to conduct effective online discussion. This guide was developed in response to the growing number of instructors at Ohio University who are considering or making the transition to using an online conferencing tool for course discussion. Online teaching is becoming a part of the educational culture with its own unique characteristics, which need to be considered in order to be successful.

This instructional guide is based on the experiences of some online teachers and students at Ohio University. While this guide is not a prescription for conducting perfect online discussions, it offers practical information for instructors who want ideas and techniques to teach online more effectively. It is not a user guide, but it is a useful collection of conceptual issues and online instructional tips organized into the following four areas: pedagogical, social, managerial, and technical.

1. Pedagogical Aspects:

Instructor as Facilitator

In online teaching the role of the teacher should be transformed from a transmitter to a facilitator, collaborator or moderator. In this role there is a partnership between the faculty and student in which they work together to achieve the course objectives. The following are some suggestions:

The Role of the Facilitator:

- The primary role of the instructor in online teaching is to create a learning environment that motivates the students to construct meanings through interaction with each other as well as with their instructor. The instructor and the student should engage in an active dialog.
- Online instructors should avoid the authoritative style especially when working with adult learners.
- It is the responsibility of the facilitator to build the understanding of conversational discussion and to move students away from the debate style, which normally leads to flaming. To do that the instructor needs to encourage students to stick to the subject of a particular line of discussion.

What the facilitator should do:

- In online teaching the facilitator is responsible for keeping discussions on track, contributing special knowledge and insights, weaving together various discussion threads and course components, and maintaining group harmony.
- To encourage participation the online instructor should introduce various options of learning that stimulate learner participation and interaction.
- The facilitator should move away from the correspondence model, in which students send in their assignments to the instructor who then sends back their feedback, to a model that would allow dialogue and interaction. The online discussion forum should allow participants' personalities to come across the medium.
- One of the biggest mistakes that an online facilitator should avoid is to treat the students as children. In fact, in the case of adult participants, some online students may be as knowledgeable

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as the facilitator in a specific subject; therefore, the facilitator should utilize this situation by asking such students to share their experience with their classmates.

- **Instructor Visibility:**

Instructor visibility is a determinant factor for the success of online discussion. Therefore, every online instructor needs to be aware of different ways and means by which they can increase their visibility in their classes. For example the following are some different type of messages that online instructors can send to increase their visibility.

- Content-related messages (i.e. handouts, discussion questions, notes).
- Rules and Guidelines (i.e. grading procedures)
- Technical tips (Internet addresses, information about how to send an image as an attachment, information of how to paste text or image).
- Responses (answers to students questions, feedback).
- Announcements (projects and assignments due dates, information about guest speakers).

The instructor can be visible by modeling a high level of participation, which often encourages the students to enhance their own participation. The instructor who shows low visibility in online discussion normally gives students an excuse to reduce their participation, or even not to show up. They assume that their instructor will not grade them down because he/she is behaving in the same way. Another reason that makes instructor visibility crucial in online discussion is to minimize the sense of isolation that distant students normally encounter. Students feel secure, connected and as if they are working in a collaborative environment with other students and with their instructor if they find a number of new messages in the forum. Instructor visibility provides distant students with a sense of belonging to a body that supplements the traditional classroom. If for any reason the instructor has to be absent he/she should notify the student as soon as possible and look for other ways of communication since the online discussion continues beyond class meeting time. (See Figure F1 for an example).

Figure F1

Hi Everyone,

I wanted to let you know that I will be out of town Wed - Sunday. I should have email access most of that time and do plan to check my email daily except Wed and Sunday. I will likely not be checking ACT until I return.

Please allow a couple days for me to reply to your emails, though - just in case there are technical problems.

I will be in my office the rest of today - so you can email me until 5ish today without any problems.

I hope this doesn't cause any major problems.
Chandra

- **Feedback:**

- Timely feedback assures students that their instructor is focusing on them and following what they are doing. On the other hand, delayed feedback leads students to think that their instructor is not involved enough in their learning process. Therefore, instructors should expect to communicate regularly and frequently with students.

Diplomatic feedback is motivational and will encourage students to be enthusiastic and confident that they will succeed online. When the instructor wants to write **critical** feedback it is crucial for him/her to send a well-worded email message that preserves student dignity and prevents embarrassment. **Warm** feedback indicates that the instructor understands and remembers that it is

people who are engaging in communication and not software. However, if a student proves to be disturbing to the online discussion he or she should receive a positive but clear message indicating that the conduct is not appropriate. Figure F2 is an example of an effective, critical and diplomatic feedback that conveys to students that their instructor is interested in their contributions.

Figure F2

> Ismail,
>
> This is a very well thought out response. I really like that you point out the importance of the attitudes – if the learners are not ready or do not see the importance of this training, that is a critical non-instructional barrier to learning.
>
> I find it interesting that you don't ask any questions in the needs analysis to determine if there are other ways than just inservice days to support this effort.
>
> I do like that you suggest really exploring the goal of technology literacy as that may have very different definitions from different parties. (The principal may think something very different from the teachers and the ID team may have a completely different idea.)
>
> Chandra

- **Online Materials**

Although the online instructor's role is basically to facilitate, he/she also should provide relevant materials to enhance the learning process. As with the student discussion, the materials need to be focused on the coursework. To help make material relevant, Instructors should develop questions and activities for learners that relate to the students' experiences. After instructors have the biographical information of their students they may be able to include material that would appeal to the learning interest of their students.

It should be made clear whether posted material is mandatory or optional so that students may mange their time and prepare for responses. Posting online material such as Mini-lectures and handouts requires careful editing since they should enhance the face-to-face lectures rather than offer a replacement. Also, all postings should be checked for accuracy regularly. Students will become frustrated with the instructor who posts a website address that is no longer there.

Be sure to edit all online course materials for correct information. All online documents should be clear and detailed, as well as containing a full description of what is required from students and the due dates of these requirements. The instructor should have class materials uploaded and tested 2 -3 days before the day in which students have to check it.

2. Social Aspects:

Online education should be looked upon as a social construct where learning is supported by technology.

- To help build a sense of community and reduce the feeling of isolation, the facilitator should encourage students to post their biographical information in the first online activity.
- Interpersonal-communication techniques are particularly important in an online environment where there are fewer verbal and physical cues to help smooth dialogue.
- The energy and personality of an online instructor can also be effectively communicated through the warmth he/she brings to the forum. Many online facilitators believe that increasing warmth online is a way to reduce the psychic distance among the forum participants.

- Another way to bring warmth to the forum is by treating students uniquely by identifying them by their names.

- Creating a friendly, social environment that promotes learning essential for the success of an online forum. Promoting collaborative work, and providing the opportunity for other interactions through the development of a café where students are free to discuss intellectual and personal matters on their own can achieve this goal.

Figure F3

Café

Area for informal discussion

Use this space to talk about whatever you want! Since you'll be seeing your team members often, but not others in the class, this is a great place to keep in touch

3. Managerial Aspects:

Managing an online conference can be time consuming and labor-intensive, therefore, instructors who want to use online discussion for the first time should be aware and prepared to accept the challenge. Once the discussion starts students can create many messages that could overwhelm the instructor. The following suggestions may help you avoid common pitfalls.

- **Organizational:**

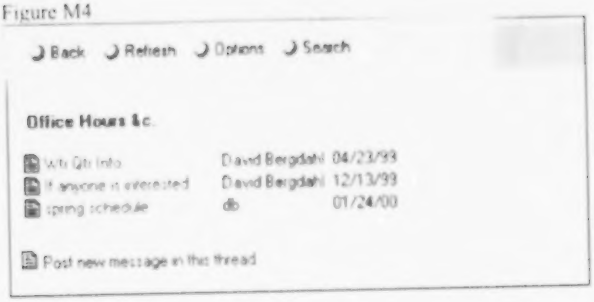
- Putting together an organized syllabus that establishes guidelines and provides students with clear and detailed information can save online instructors a lot of time and effort. The syllabus should state in detail what is expected when students have to give feedback to the class. It may be useful to provide both the week and the due date for assignments rather than just writing "the feedback is due on Monday."

- Novice online instructors often underestimate the time and effort required for planning, developing and putting together online course materials. Many online instructors emphasize that lead-time to prepare an online course is substantially greater than they anticipated. Therefore, careful planning is essential.

- A classroom with 20 students or more will likely generate a huge number of messages in a short time. Breaking the class into small groups with 5-7 students will ease the management issues. Furthermore, it will encourage more interactions among students by keeping the number of messages smaller and the discussion more on track.

- For organizational purposes instructors may create an area in which they can post announcements, contact information, office hours, and links to related web sites. The idea announcement can be seen in Figure M4.

Figure M4



➢ **Procedural:**

- Depending on the objectives of the online conference the instructor may decide to encourage informality in discussion. For example, the instructor may decide to let participants know that perfect grammar and typing is less important than making their ideas and arguments clear.

- It is recommended that the instructor respond to students' postings within 72 hours. The instructor may not send feedback to every student, however he/she can respond to several students at once by weaving their contributions together or summarizing the discussion.

- The policy of participation should be clearly stated in the syllabus. Both the importance of participation to the learning experience, as well as how participation will contribute to the student grade, should be emphasized. The instructor also needs to address in the syllabus the issue of late assignments and how he/she will handle them.

- To ensure thoughtful active discussions, students should be graded on their participation in them. This grade should be at least 20-25% of the total grade for the course.

➢ **Administrative:**

- When a discussion thread or a conference has served its purpose the instructor should be decisive in ending it.

- Students can be given an opportunity to lead, moderate, or assist in directing the discussion. The instructor may ask students to take turns to experience administration responsibility.

- In any online conference there are two extreme cases: an active participant who appears above the class level and an invisible member who contributes little to the discussion. The instructor needs to privately contact these members to ask the first to wait a few responses before contributing (see example M1) and to ask the second to participate more actively (see example M2).

M1	M2
Overachiever Mary, I like your thoughtful and critical reflections for the discussion topics. My only concern that your classmates are left behind and they have little to add to the discussion. I'd appreciate if you'd slow down a little bit so that your classmates can give it a shot. Thanks	**Lurker** John, I am a little bit worried about your contribution to the discussion forum. You have only posted one message in the last two weeks. Is there any problem that is holding you back from the class discussion. You need to move forward and to catch up with the group. Just remember that 25% of your grade comes from your participation in the discussion. Thanks.

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- Conflict may erupt in online discussion, especially when the topic of the discussion is somewhat controversial. In many cases that can lead to "flaming". These remarks are not productive and may destroy the discussion. To guard against conflicts instructors need to set up norms and rules for the online conference that lay the foundation for a conflict management strategy. For example, the instructor can set a rule at the beginning of the conference to asking students to respect all opinions and not impose their views on others.

4. Technical Aspects:

In an online environment, problems related to hardware and software will likely arise. So, while remaining focused on the learning process, the online instructor must develop a working understanding of the technology s/he is using.

- The instructor should provide students with a user guide or website for the online conference that addresses both the content and the common technical problems. Novice users need time so that they can be comfortable with the technology. Therefore, the instructor should give students adequate time to learn the system before they participate

- Before starting an online conference instructors need to acquire the appropriate training in configuring, manipulating, and managing the conference. A step-by-step, face-to-face tutorial for novice computer conference administrator is recommended. The instructor should be aware of who is available for technical support beyond his/her technical skill. Contact information about the technical support personnel should be made available to students in the syllabus.

- Using a graduate or teaching assistant who has technical skill is important for the success of the conference. Graduate or teaching assistants can help with technical issues, as well as sharing administrative and teaching load. For example, a teaching assistant can reply to many technical questions or send feedback related to the discussion, or even step in to direct the discussion in the instance of the instructor's absence.

For more information

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